

PRIVATE SARAH E. EDMONDS (Deceased)



Sarah Emma Edmonds was born in December 1841 in New Brunswick, Canada. Edmonds was the fifth of five children—four girls and one boy with epilepsy. Her father was discontented with having girls and wanted boys to help with the overwhelming farm work. To gain acceptance, Sarah dressed in boy's clothes and helped with the farming. In 1858 Edmonds fled an arranged marriage by disguising herself as a man. To prevent discovery, she eventually adopted the persona of Franklin Thompson. As Thompson she was able to earn a living as a Bible salesman in Michigan.

By 1861, continuing the disguise, Edmonds attempted to enlist in the Michigan Infantry, but failed the height requirement. In May of the same year, Edmonds was successful in enlisting in the 2nd Michigan Infantry disguised as Thompson. She was assigned as a Field Nurse to assist the chaplain and his wife. She saw service at both battles of Bull Run, the Peninsula Campaign, Antietam and Fredericksburg.

The death of a childhood friend in the Peninsula Campaign convinced her to volunteer for duty as a spy. According to her memoirs published in 1865, GEN McClellan personally interviewed her for the job. She was tested on the knowledge of firearms and given a phrenological examination after which she was sworn into the secret service. Edmonds adopted several disguises for her spy missions, including using silver nitrate to disguise her skin color. She claimed to have performed 11 secret missions during the war.

In 1863, shortly after her regiment moved into Kentucky, Edmonds contracted malaria and was forced to desert in order to avoid being exposed. Upon returning to Cairo, Illinois, Edmonds resumed her role as a female nurse. She remained in the



*Sarah Emma Edmonds
disguised as Franklin Thompson*

service serving at Harper's Ferry with the Christian Commission.

It was not until 1884 that Edmonds publicly revealed her true identity at a regimental reunion. In 1886, Congress awarded her a pension and dropped the bad conduct discharge for desertion. She was then admitted to the Grand Army of the Republic and has the distinction of remaining its only female member.

Sarah Edmonds passed away in September 1898. She was posthumously inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1988.

[Note: Sarah Emma Edmonds' memoirs, *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse, and Spy: A Woman's Adventures in the Union Army*, were published in 1865. Chapters dedicated to her are also in H. Donald Winkler's *Stealing Secrets: How a Few Daring Women Deceived Generals, Impacted Battles, and Altered the Course of the Civil War* (2010) and *Military Intelligence: Its Heroes and Legends*, compiled by Diane L. Hamm (1987). The various sources citing Edmonds' story have conflicting facts—everything from the number and gender of her siblings, the spelling of her name, and the title of her memoirs. While the fact that she served in the Union Army disguised as a man is not disputed, her claims to have been a spy have been questioned. See G.J.A. O'Toole's *The Encyclopedia of American Intelligence and Espionage* (1988).]